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Valley could get 4,000 jobs

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For years, Decatur's potential sales tax revenue has driven across the Tennessee River and out of the city to Huntsville and Madison.

A proposed \$1.3 billion commercial development on Alabama 20 could change that, not only keeping Decatur shoppers in town but drawing Huntsville and Madison residents to a sprawling 1.35-million-square-foot project in Decatur-annexed Limestone County, north of the river.

On Monday, the Decatur City Council unanimously approved a resolution authorizing Mayor Don Kyle to negotiate a non-binding agreement with a developer and to bring back a plan to the council by March 11 for final approval. The development could employ as many as 4,000 people, according to the city's resolution.

"With a development of this size, it could be a destination as a shopping place for the region," Kyle said Monday via cellphone from New York City. Kyle did not attend the special council meeting because he was out of town assisting Decatur Utilities refinance its bonds.

"This is a very complicated project, with so much at stake and so many players involved," Kyle said. "But it's an opportunity to open up the Limestone County portion of the city to development, and what it can be is just tremendous.

"It's a hard deal to put together with several parties involved, but it can all work as long as it's beneficial to everyone."

Officials in Decatur were tight-lipped about the proposed development, declining to release the exact location of the site. Decatur officials have signed strict non-disclosure agreements forbidding them from discussing details about the proposed development until a final deal has been reached, Council President Gary Hammon said. The developer wants to remain anonymous, he said.

The resolution states that Kyle will negotiate on a non-binding basis with the "developer, proposed tenants, all related government entities, utility companies and others deemed necessary by the mayor for the development of the project." Kyle must present the "results of the negotiations and his proposals for implementing them, including development documents, arrangements for financial assistance, if any, including public financing and any other proposal deemed necessary or proper to the City Council as soon as practical."

It also urges Kyle to present the council by March 11 with any and all negotiated non-binding documents and other plans recommended for the development for its consideration and possible approval and implementation.

"The timing of all this is very critical," Kyle said. "It can't be extended, and everyone has to be able to make firm commitments. We're in the process of lining up all the legal documents that lock in those commitments so that everyone understands their roles."

It is not clear if the project would be on the same 536-acre site once considered by Sweetwater developer Genesis USA for a mixed-use development.

The project included a 130,000-square-foot Bass Pro Shop, 300-room hotel and convention center, commercial and medical offices, and an upscale housing development. The development, which Kyle spearheaded during his previous administration, has been on hold since August 2008, when the nation's economy began to sharply contract and Kyle narrowly lost his re-election bid to former Mayor Don Stanford.

Officials said Sweetwater developer Genesis USA still has an option on the property. Before the recession stalled the project and the deal expired, Decatur had offered a total of \$50 million in infrastructure, land and tax abatements for

the proposed development. Genesis USA Development's Decatur attorney, Barney Lovelace, did not return a call for comment Monday.

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Attachments

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